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AUTHOR Roberts, Ruth S.
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ABSTRACT

Reviewed are research and literature related to language development in culturally different children, and reported are results from a study of the written language of 120 fifth grade students randomly selected from four schools that varied in racial populations. It is explained that Ss came from schools which were 96% Black, 62% Black, 30% Black, and less than 1% Black. Samples of unstructured class compositions and structured cloze procedure paragraphs are said to have been analyzed for number of words in a composition, average words per sentence, type-token ratio from the composition, and the exact and syntactically correct words from the cloze. Among findings reported were that as the percentages of Black students increased in the School, the incidence of Black construction increased without a reduction in language scores. Implications for dealing with language in the schools are suggested, such as acceptance of natural language through the second grade. (LS)

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Black Language: Different, Deficient or Natural?

Ruth S. Roberts
Assistant Professor

Department of Counseling and Special Education
The University of Akron
Akron, Ohio

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~~Black~~ Language: Different ~~Universal~~, Deficient or Natural? by Ruth S. Roberts

Abstract: Perspectives on language are examined in order to select procedures for evaluating the written work of fifth grade students in four schools that vary in racial populations. Universal characteristics of written language such as the average words per sentence, the type token ration and the length of compositions and the completion of cloze procedures were used.

A multivariate analysis of variance was employed to examine the data across the four schools representing different language environments (96 percent black; 62 percent black; 30 percent black; less than one percent black). The population sample consisted of 120 students, thirty randomly selected from each school with equal numbers of boys and girls.

The mean scores in all four schools fell within the normal range of language performance reported by special educators. Differences appeared in the planned contrast between the 96 percent black school and the school that had less than one percent black. The study confirmed the reports of special educators and linguists that the average words per sentence score universally has the smallest standard deviation within age groups and appears to be related to chronological maturation in normal children and maturational lag in exceptional children. In a study of redundancy, two components were identified that accounted for 51.79 percent of the variance. Component I is the ability to use words according to the school standard and Component II is the ability to produce a stream of words. The study confirmed that there are certain language constructions found in the written work of students in the predominantly black schools not found in the work of low socio-economic white children.

Black Language: Different, Deficient or Natural?

Benjamin S. Bloom has written:

> If I could have one wish for education during the next decade, it would be the systematic ordering of our basic knowledge in such a way that what is known and true can be acted upon, while what is superstition, fad, and myth can be recognized as such and used only where there is nothing else to support us in our frustration and despair (1972, 2).
> (School Review, 80 (May, 1972 1-20) Innocence in Education)

One of the great myths of our time is what has been dubbed as the "Bishop Lowth Complex About Teaching Grammar" (Belok and Clift, 1974). Its origin has been traced to the prevailing attitude towards language of the eighteenth century embodied in a publication by Bishop Lowth. The book which was widely distributed in the United States described language as a divine institution, originally perfect, but debased by man. English was regarded as a corrupt and degenerate offspring of Latin and Greek. "This eighteenth century tradition of English grammar continues almost unchanged, leaving an ever-widening gap between the sound conclusions of our linguistic scholars and the archaic method of teaching the structure of our language" (p. 274).

In contrast to this position linguists today describe language as being appropriate or inappropriate to the context and situation in which it is used. Linguists generally shun such terms as good or bad or right and wrong in their description of language.

Wolfram, an associate director of the center for Applied Linguistics has described his point of view thusly:

> (Wolfram 1970): Language is learned in the context of the community. All linguistic evidence points to the conclusion that children have acquired a fairly complete language system by the age of five or six, with minor adjustments in language competence sometimes occurring until eight or nine. This system is acquired from contact with individuals in the immediate environment. Whether the source for this acquisition is parental, sibling, or peer group interaction is only incidental from a linguistic viewpoint. What is more important is the fact that the rate of language development is approximately parallel

> across cultures and sub-cultures. That is, lower class children learn nonstandard dialects at approximately the same rate as middle-class children learn standard English (p. 740-741).

The fad of describing selected children's language as restricted and therefore incapable of processing school language was derived from misreadings of the work of the English sociologist Basil Bernstein (Weber, 1971). Bernstein's emphasis was on relating language performance to elements in the environment which discouraged elaborate use of language. As interpreted in many school programs, the remedy lies in patterning language rather than as Bernstein himself suggested in providing a more enriching school environment;

To quote Bernstein: "Because a code is restricted it does not mean that a child is non-verbal, nor is in the technical sense linguistically deprived for he possesses the same tacit understanding of the linguistic rule system as any child. It simply means that there is a restriction on the contexts and on the conditions which will orient the child to universlistic orders of meaning and to making those linguistic choices through which such meanings are realized and so made public. It does not mean that the children cannot produce at any time elaborated speech in particular contexts (p.198)."

A third myth, fad or superstition that colors responses to language performance in our schools is the assumption that verbal expression is the sole channel for human intelligence. Hans Furth in his work with profoundly deaf children (1966) had reported on procedures that tap the thinking of deaf children using figural symbols that have no verbal equivalents. R. M. Reitan, a neurologist, and psychologist has developed a battery of tests which tap a high level of non-verbal thinking. (In Woman 1972)

As Troike (1970) has pointed out, the children are able to understand their teachers but the teachers do not comprehend or give credit for understanding to the children in their classes who speak a non-school language.

Does it make a difference what the teacher believes? Yes, it appears to make a great difference to those children who come to school speaking a language that is significantly different from that of the school.

Jane Mercer, a sociologist in California has stated that:

> Approximately 75 per cent of the children in classes for the educable mentally retarded in two school districts in California would not have been placed in special education if their adaptive behavior and socio-cultural backgrounds had been systematically taken into account at the time of assessment. When they were taken into account, the proportion of children diagnosed as mentally retarded from each ethnic group (Chicano and black), was approximately the same as the proportion of children from that ethnic group in the total public school population (p. 23).

Mercer suggests that an educational program should be based on the assumption that the culturally different child is a person with normal learning ability who may need special help in learning the ways of the dominant society. This recommendation, in order to be implemented, requires that educators set criteria for discriminating between different language and deficient language. In many schools where the language of the children is clearly non-English (e.g., Spanish or Navaho), this challenge has been met by teaching English as a second language (Bartley and Politzer, 1971). However, when the language of the students is a deviant or dialect English, it is labeled in the elementary texts as slang or vulgar language (Conlin and Fillmer, 1967).

Shuy (1973) described the problems in delineating the characteristics of English dialect when many of its features seem to be shared by different cultural groups and not all members of the same cultural group use the same dialect structures. He suggests the need for test situations which would allow for variability of language in various cultural groups and the identification of

the differences between standard and nonstandard English. Educators are challenged to discriminate between universal developmental factors of language and the incidental variations due to cultural differences. Cazden (1967) has stated this dichotomy as competency versus performance. Competency is what a person knows, performance is what he does.

Chomsky belongs to a group of scholars whose field crosses all human languages: They seek universals of language across cultures in order to develop a theory of language which can account for all languages. Chomsky also believes that a theory of language must account for the ability of very young children to be able to form grammatically accurate sentences in their natural languages.

Chomsky suggests that tests of language should seek to differentiate between underlying competence and surface features of performance

McNeil (1966) emphasized the challenge for the development of a theory of language development when he stated:

> The fundamental problem to which we address ourselves is the simple fact that language acquisition occurs in a surprisingly short time. Grammatical speech does not begin before one-and-one-half years of age; yet, as far as we can tell, the basic process is complete by three-and-one-half years. ...We can agree with Brown and Bellugi (1964) when they write: 'The very intricate simultaneous differentiation and integration that constitutes the evolution of the noun phrase is more reminiscent of the biological development of an embryo than it is of the acquisition of a conditioned reflex.' (p. 36)

Cross-cultural studies in six different languages have identified the same language development pattern of two word sentences typical of the eighteen month old. This onset of the same pattern occurred in cultural communities as different as university towns in the United States, Samoan and African villages, and Finnish and Russian communities (Slobin, 1971).

Lenneberg (1966) studied the Dani of Dutch New Guinea, the Zuni of the American southwest, and the Bororo and some Ge tribes of central Brazil. He paired tests of sensorimotor development with the onset of language to the age of three. He concluded that there is parallel development between motor skills and development of language. For example, the first words appear at about the same time that walking is accomplished. By the time that a child is able to jump down from a chair (or its equivalent), tiptoe, or walk backward three yards, he is typically communicating fluently, even though certain inaccuracies and childlike usages seem to persist for a longer period.

Anthropologist Levi-Strauss (1962) has disputed the label "primitive language" when applied to any natural living language. The developmental studies (Lenneberg, 1966; Slobin, 1971) supported the view that no natural language is inherently more complicated to learn by a growing child than any other language. There seemed to be no relation between progress in language acquisition and culturally determined aspects of language. Thus the emergence of speech and language habits was more easily accounted for by assuming maturational changes within the growing child than by postulating special training procedures in the child's surroundings. Fodor (1966) stated, "I propose to consider the child to be a 'black box' that converts some data about a language into whatever syntactic information is required to speak the language" (p. 108).

In another discipline, pathologists dealing with language disabilities have described a hierarchy of language development related to chronological age. Ruder (1972) organized the elements of language acquisition in a sequential order starting with an assumption that every child has an innate capacity for language acquisition which includes the child's tacit knowledge of linguistic universals. Linguistic universals include those elements of a

grammar which are found in every language. The substantative universals include distinctive features, parts of speech (noun, verb, etc.), syntactic categories (subject, predicate), and basic grammatical relations (actor-action-object). The child is considered competent when his speech approximates the adult linguistic competence. Ruder suggested that his model is general enough that it is independent of any specific language: "That it should apply to the language acquisition process of any child of any language environment." (p. 11). Others who have constructed similar hierarchical structures are Williams and Naremore (1972) and Bellugi and Brown (1964). These hierarchical structures, derived from empirical observations of the language performance of children tend to indicate that the number of words per utterance, and the use of increasing variety of kinds of words, such as adjectives, adverbs, prepositions and conjunctions is related to chronological growth. Lenneberg relates this development to biological maturation. Piaget links language development to stages of cognitive organization. However, Piaget holds a position separate from those who believe language precedes cognitive functions. Piaget (1973) stated" "Language can constitute a necessary condition for the completion of logico-mathematical operations without being a sufficient condition for their formation (p. 113).

Myklebust (1973) and Cartwright (1968) incorporated the elements that signify language development in their studies of children with disabilities. Cartwright compared the written language performance of children with mental retardation and that of children with normal ability. Myklebust compared several disabled populations such as the deaf, neurologically handicapped and the retarded with normal children. These comparisons provide levels of competency that may be used to discriminate between the language of children operating within a normal range of language and those who may be functioning at a

much lower or much higher level. From his studies, Dr. Myklebust developed numerical scores describing the total number of words per composition, the average words per sentence and the type-token ratio, the last of which provides a measure of the variety of words in the composition.

The use of procedures from the research work of Myklebust and Cartwright to evaluate the written language performance of fifth grade students of low socioeconomic status can be further defined by adding the factor of ethnic identity. In most studies of language performance, black children are reported as performing at a lower level than white students of comparable social status. The use of language evaluation procedures that are indifferent to cultural language differences but do measure universal developmental qualities ~~made~~ suggested their use for dialect evaluation ~~a possibility~~. Myklebust' test has been used in South America (1973).

Need for a Study of Black English

The failure of school districts to test children in their native language or to provide for the special educational needs of cultural minorities has been noted in court decisions in San Francisco, Denver, Portales (New Mexico), and New York City (Pena, 1975). These cases involved children from Chinese, Japanese, Philippine, Mexican, and Spanish backgrounds. The courts ruled that this failure to provide for the special needs of the non-English-speaking students was a violation under the provisions of the Civil Rights Act, Title VI of 1964. The Office of Civil Rights of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare stated:

> Where inability to speak and understand the English language excludes national origin-minority group children from effective participation in the educational program offered by a school district, the district must take affirmative steps to rectify the language deficienty in order to open its instructional program to these students (Pena, 1975, p. 83).

Following these guidelines funds have been provided under the Bilingual Education Act (ESEA Title VII). In addition, ten states (Massachusetts, Texas, Illinois, California, New York, Colorado, Louisiana, Michigan, Alaska and New Mexico) are funding their own bilingual programs. The programs utilize 24 languages and dialects other than standard English. While the principle of testing and instructing in the language of the child appears established by court decision and federal and state laws, Pena stated that only one-fourth of the money allocated by Congress was appropriated and only about three percent of the target population has been served (p. 72).

As Rist (1970); Braun, Neilsen ND Dykstra (1976) have demonstrated, teacher expectation can be a prime mover or an inhibitor for the children in their classes. It all depends on what the teacher believes and expects from the children. A recent study by Kholseth indicates that a massive language shift is underway in our country due to recent waves of immigration. A total of 141 different languages have been identified for Illinois alone. The United States Office of Education estimates that at least five million children now in school need special language programsbecause English is not the language spoken at home.

Laura Johnson (1976) believes that the long last monolingual "mania" is losing its grip and the native speakers of Spanish, French, and the American Indian languages are beginning to be recognized as the rich cultural resources they are.

One of the largest culturally different groups not being served through the bilingual programs are the low socioeconomic black children. Whereas Spanish, Chinese, and the American dialects are clearly different languages, black English, as a dialect of standard English, has not received wide acceptance as acceptable language. Bailey (1965) noted that while some dialects

of English such as the New England are accepted and hold respected positions, black English is considered by many individuals to be incorrect usage and connotes low academic performance. Another problem is that black dialect itself may vary in black communities across the country or across socioeconomic classes. Some features of black dialect may also be found in other American dialects. Principle records of regional variations in dialects are found in the archives of the group of associated projects constituting the Linguistic Atlas of the United States and Canada. Begun in 1930, the Atlas has recorded the evidence on several hundred features of grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary. McDavid (1967) has listed three forces that account for what are seen as dialect contours or isoglasses on the Linguistic Atlas. (These contours are similar to isobars on a weather map that indicate similar temperatures across the country.) These forces are industrialization, urbanization, and the spread of public education. Where a group of people have been isolated by hiring practices, settlement in rural areas or attendance at segregated schools, their language would reflect that isolation by many distinctive features. As a group of people gain access to industrial employment, urban housing and mainstream public education, their language would become less different from the modal language.

Systematic study by the Center for Applied Linguistics in Washington, D. C., has identified certain features which can be described as black English. Labov (1969) demonstrated that individual characteristics of black speech can be found in various other dialects of English, but frequency and combinations of features united to make what is known as black English. Fasold and Wolfram (1970) presented a detailed analysis of high frequency items which are unique to black English. They showed that many characteristics of the language of black children are regular and predictable. Shuy (1970) emphasized the need for test

situations in schools which allow for expression of the variability of language usage among black children so that differences which may account for interference with instruction in standard English may be identified.

Bayard Rustin, one of the leaders of the struggle for the civil rights of black Americans (1971) questioned the validity of black English as being especially black. Rustin believes that black English has little to do with blackness but derives from the conditions of lower class life in the south (poor southern whites, he says, also speak "black English".)

To explore the difference-deficits controversey, samples of the written language performance of fifth grade students in four schools with varying degree of black to white populations were selected. Two kinds of performance samples were elicited in order to contrast kinds of responses. The first was the unstructured class composition; the other was the structured cloze procedure paragraph. In the cloze procedure the student was required to fill in the exact word that had been deleted. The student also received a score for different but syntactically correct words restored. The two language writing tasks ~~administered~~ yielded five scores: Number of words in a composition, average words per sentence, type-token ratio from the composition, and the exact and syntactically correct words from the cloze. The data was examined in a computer program (Finn, 1968) which provided a univariate and multivariate analysis across the four schools by sex and by language scores.

Three main hypotheses were developed and tested which reflected concerns about the language of lower socioeconomic fifth grade students. The first area of study dealt with whether males and females were significantly different from each other in language as determined by language scores. The findings indicated no differences. Greater variability in all language scores was found within the same sex group than between the sexes.

The second hypothesis focused on the differences, if any, that might occur utilizing the language scores among the four schools which were characterized by varying percentages of black students. Using the composition and cloze analysis, the incidence of black constructions was recorded for each child. It was found that as the percentages of black studerts increased in the school, the greater the incidence of black construction was evident without a reduction in language scores. This finding substantiated the idea of acculturation in language form and expression as natural to the group, not a deficit in language. Further evidence in support of acculturation as opposed to deficit was found in the language scores of students who were forced to move from School A to School B through an urban renewal project. See Tables 3 and 11. There is no significant difference in four of the language scores but type-token ratio the variety of words used, showed an increase significant at, p less than .01, and a decrease in the use of black constructions from 60 to 38. An examination of the language curriculum revealed no difference in content or methodology. Therefore it is logical to conclude that differences when they occurred among the schools were a function of student composition.

The strongest finding in this study is that, despite a high incidence of black English in their written work, the students performed within the normal rate for average words per sentence established by Myklebust (1973) and type-token ratio set by Cartwright (1968). None of the three schools having black students. was significantly different from the all white school for the cloze procedure scores which required knowledge of standard English syntax.

The reported findings of studies of children at the third grade level and younger indicate that the eight black constructions used in this study are usually found in the speech of children in all black, low socioeconomic schools (Baratz, 1969; Peisach, 1965). (The investigator has been unable to locate any

studies which included the effects of a mixture of black and white children on the uses of black dialect. The contrasts are usually between all white and all black populations). In this study of the eight black constructions, four tend to persist at the fifth grade. Four of these are included by Wolfram (1970) in his list of black English constructions that are "sharp social gradients" that mark low socioeconomic speech from that of middle class black English. Wolfram suggested that this factor be considered when planning language programs. By a sharp social gradient, Wolfram meant that the use of these constructions identified the speaker, even to other black members of the community, as among the poorest and least educated. In Table 1 the eight features of black language are presented with Wolfram's sharp social gradients indicated by an asterisk. (Wolfram's list also includes some features only found in speech, 1970, p. 117).

It is interesting to note that the double negative and ain't have yielded to the prescriptive grammarian's emphasis (the teacher) and not one instance was observed.

Some features of black English are shared by other dialects (McDavid, 1970; Hunt, 1974). The Appalachian dialect is another language variant prevalent in the same section of the midwest. This may account for the appearance of four features in the language of four children in the all white school. Wolfram, who has contributed much to the understanding of black English, is now engaged in a study of the Appalachian dialect.

The accumulation of facts about language must be so that they can be incorporated into teacher education. The teacher must learn to respond to dialectical differences as viable language. But larger questions must be determined by the community.

Examples may be found in the European community where lingual minorities are created by wars, population migrations and international agreements (Holmstad and Lade, 1969). Language is precious to people for many different reasons. It may mean a cultural heritage, political power, religious affiliation, economic passport or assignment to a caste. The choice of language in a school is a decision for all in the community to make after the implications have been carefully considered. The school needs to examine its role as ~~the protector of the values of~~ in a pluralistic society.

The decision must include a description of the goals for language from primary through high school. It is possible that the decision would recommend acceptance of natural language through the second grade. Formal instruction in standard English might then begin in the third grade with the introduction of the contrasts suggested by Wolfram (1970).

Just as all teachers are now expected to teach reading (Teacher Redesign, 1974), all teachers would also receive training in linguistics.

Special materials would need to be developed and introduced in classroom instruction to implement the decisions made by the community.

Appropriate evaluation procedures would need to be developed. Language goals would be stated in terms of language tasks as criterion referenced tests rather than stanines in a continuum of variance.

The most important change is to adopt the definition of language suggested by J. B. Carroll (1973):

> Language is a complex human phenomenon that takes the same general form wherever it is found. It permits the expression of a certain very wide range of information, experiences, feelings, and thoughts, and it does so in the same way regardless of the particular form of the language, or the culture of the user, as long as the language is a so-called natural language that is used from childhood on as a native language by its users (p. 177).

TABLE 11

THE INCIDENCE OF THE EIGHT BLACK ENGLISH CONSTRUCTIONS BY SCHOOLS WITH WOLFRAM'S (1970, p. 117) IDENTIFICATION OF SHARP SOCIAL GRADIENTS*

Black English Feature	Total	School A	School B	School C	School D
*Non-addition of third person /s/ on verb	49	24	15	6	4
*Zero copula	9	3	5	0	1
*Double Negative. and ain't	0	0	0	0	0
Zero if plus verb plus subject	2	2	0	0	0
Zero past morphemes	44	22	12	9	1
*Zero possessive morphemes	4	4	0	0	0
*Use of "be"	14	3	5	0	6
No plural marker on noun when preceded by adjective denoting plurality	3	2	1	0	0
Total		60	38	15	12
No. of students in each school using constructions in written work		21	18	9	4

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